



Matthew Bennett
Primary Color, 2017
Oil on Panel

Gift to the people of Ocala from the David and Lisa Midgett Foundation, 2019

The printing of this teaching poster was made possible by the David and Lisa Midgett Foundation.

INTRODUCTION

Representation in art matters and it’s important that students see positive images of themselves in the artwork they view. This teaching poster is the perfect way to introduce students to the Appleton Museum of Art before a class fieldtrip and as a tool to enhance their visual literacy. We encourage teachers to hang this poster in their classrooms and use it as a source of inspiration for both thoughtful discussion and art making.

Before starting a discussion, give the students a few minutes to look closely at *Primary Color*. Ask students to tell you what they see. After you’ve spent a few minutes discussing all the recognizable elements, have them dig for deeper meaning and understanding. Having students verbalize their thoughts when examining a piece of art improves critical thinking skills.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why is this painting called *Primary Color*? (Review out loud the primary colors and look for them in the painting.)
- What is the setting of this painting? How does the artist convey that?
- What is the significance of the woman’s earring?
- Is this Wonder Woman, or someone in a Wonder Woman costume?
- The artist has stated that when he paints someone’s portrait, it is both a portrait of the person and of himself. What does the artist mean? How do you think the artist is represented in the painting?
- In the background of the painting there is text from the poem “For women who are difficult to love” by Warsan Shire. It says, “You are terrifying and strange and beautiful/something not everyone knows how to love.” Why do you think the artist included those lines? Does it help you understand the painting better?
- Why are the spray paint cans labeled “justice,” “equity,” and “truth?”
- Are there superheroes in real life? Who would you consider heroic?
- If this is a portrait of the artist’s friend, how does the artist see her?
- If you were to be depicted as a superhero, which one would you be?

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Matthew S. Bennett is a visual artist working primarily in paint and pencil. Based in Jacksonville, FL, Bennett is largely a self-taught artist. His work is firmly steeped in traditional representation, but not bound by it. His initial inspirations range from Michelangelo, John Singer Sargent and William-Adolphe Bouguereau, to comic artists Bernie Wrightson, Jack Kirby and Frank Miller. Bennett considers the works he creates a dual portrait — a study of himself and the subject.

The model in *Primary Color* is a personal friend of the artist. Her portrait stemmed from a series of conversations she had with Bennett about what she has to deal with on a daily basis in regards to her race and gender.

ABOUT THE ARTWORK

Primary Color is an almost life-sized portrait of an African American woman in a realistic urban setting dressed as the recognizable “Wonder Woman.” Her face is in profile, gazing off to the side and displaying an earring shaped like the continent of Africa, while the rest of her body faces the viewer straight on. She is framed by a painted door that is part of a wooden fence decorated by graffiti. Her hand rests on a yellow trash bin while blue, yellow and red spray cans labeled “justice,” “equity” and “truth” rest by her feet. It is unclear if the woman is meant to be the actual Wonder Woman or just a woman wearing a costume. Nevertheless, she exudes beauty, strength and power. With her golden lasso in hand, she seems ready to face both figuratively and literally whatever challenges the world might throw at her.

FURTHER EXPLORATION

Compare and contrast Matthew Bennett’s *Primary Color* with the artwork of 19th century French artist William-Adolphe Bouguereau.

Matthew Bennett cites Bouguereau as an inspiration, and the Appleton Museum of Art has three painting by Bouguereau in the permanent collection. Have students verbally compare and contrast Bouguereau’s *The Knitter* or *Young Shepherdess* (images can easily be found online) with Bennett’s *Primary Color*.

Then, schedule a visit to the Appleton Museum of Art so the students can view the paintings in person. Visits can be scheduled by contacting 352-291-4455, ext. 1849.

WHAT DOES A SUPERHERO LOOK LIKE?

White men have traditionally been the central superheroes in comics and movies. However, there has been a recent influx of movies and TV shows with women and people of color who fill prominent superhero roles. Some examples are *Super Girl* (2015-current), *Luke Cage* (2016-2018) *Legends of Tomorrow* (2016-current), *Wonder Woman* (2017) and *Black Panther* (2018). In the animated film *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018), the main character Milo Morales has an African American father and a Puerto Rican mother, which is a reflection of our current multicultural society.

Matthew Bennett’s *Primary Color* depicts an African American woman as the titular Wonder Woman when the character has traditionally not been depicted as such. As this painting and recent movies show us, anyone can be superhero regardless of their race, gender, or even age.

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The primary color here is, of course, brown, I consider this painting part of an ongoing conversation with my friend regarding what it’s like to be a black woman from Connecticut who has moved to the south. The subject is a reluctant hero, forced by events to be bold and courageous when she shouldn’t have to be.

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Matthew Bennett

SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

- Superhero Self Portraits**
Have the students draw self-portraits of themselves either as recognizable superheroes or their own unique creation.
- Superhero Gesture Drawings**
Have students take turns striking superhero poses while their classmates sketch quick gestural drawings. Have students re-sketch their initial rough gestures into more recognizable shapes, and ultimately create a drawing with a lineup of superheroes in different poses.
- Create an Autobiographical Comic panel**
Provide students with a comic panel and have them depict an important event in their life like a birthday, losing a tooth, or another milestone. Have students write and edit their text to go along with their comic.
- Onomatopoeia Word Art**
Review the term onomatopoeia. Onomatopoeia is a word that sounds like what it describes. Examples include bang, splat, and zoom. Create a class list of onomatopoeias. Have students choose one word to draw comic book–style with bold lines surrounding the word. (Use the internet to look at “Pop Art” references.)
- Compare and Contrast Comic Book Art with Pop Art**
Compare and contrast comic book art with artwork by artists Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol. What did Lichtenstein and Warhol include in their artwork that makes it look similar to comic book art?
- Superhero Theme Songs and Music**
Play superhero theme songs or movie soundtracks and let the music inspire their drawings and paintings.
- Superhero Acrostic Poem**
In an acrostic poem the first letter in each line of the poem spells out a word. Using superhero names have students compose acrostic poems about superheroes. For example, Batman. Bold and swift/an acrobatic hero/titan of industry/martial arts expert/anonymously protects Gotham/night will never be the same.

